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SUBJECT: Embassy Santiago Nomination for International Woman of Courage Award

REF: STATE 111471

¶1. Post nominates Maria Antonieta Saa Diaz, Chilean parliamentarian, for the Secretary's International Woman of Courage Award for 2010. Deputy Saa has been a fierce advocate for women's issues throughout her political career, spanning from her clandestine activism during the Pinochet dictatorship to her roles as mayor and member of Congress. Whether she is co-authoring and supporting legislation on trafficking in persons, advocating for harsher punishments for domestic violence, or speaking out about access to reproductive health and education, Saa has always worked to put women's issues at the top of the agenda.

¶2. Since she was a young child, Saa dreamed of a career in politics, telling her mother that she wanted to become the first female president of Chile. At twelve years old, Saa began her lifelong commitment to social justice issues by joining the Catholic Student Youth organization (Juventud Estudiantil Catolica). With Juventud Estudiantil Catolica, Saa engaged in her first community service efforts, volunteering in impoverished areas of Santiago, and took on the first of many leadership roles. During her time with this organization, Saa traveled to Berlin, Germany, to participate in an international Catholic Student Youth conference. Along with fellow students, Saa was in Berlin to witness the building of the Berlin Wall and to experience, first-hand, the ravages of Communism.

A Women's and Human Rights Advocate from Dictatorship to Democracy

¶3. A woman of courage since her early days in the trenches of the Chilean feminist movement, Saa faced a difficult decision following the 1973 military coup d'etat. Many progressive leaders and ordinary citizens were fleeing Chile due to the harsh repression and very real risk of detention, torture, or death at the hands of the Pinochet military regime. However, Saa made a personal and political decision to remain in Chile despite these risks and continue her work clandestinely, leading many of the first feminist organizations in Chile.

¶4. While a member of the vanguard of the Second Wave feminist movement in Chile in the 1980s, Saa worked as the General Coordinator of the non-governmental organization Circle of Women's Studies. This organization was instrumental in disseminating, analyzing, and producing the literature that served as the basis for the women's movement in Chile. Saa was a member of Women for Life (Mujeres por la Vida), a non-violent group composed of human rights activists and family members of the disappeared and politically imprisoned; it demonstrated against Gen. Pinochet's

dictatorship. With this organization, Saa worked with women of a variety of political stripes to increase the profile of women's issues in Chile and on the agenda of the Pinochet administration and to integrate women into the burgeoning pro-democracy movement. At this point, Saa's active participation in political demonstrations was noticed, and she was first identified by the Carabineros (Chilean uniformed police officers) as a principal member of the opposition to the military dictatorship.

¶ 15. Saa served as the sole women's representative in the Civilian Assembly, an opposition group composed of members of various political organizations, and was elected director of the group in 1986. The Civilian Assembly presented a formal list of demands to the military dictatorship, including a petition for the recognition of women's issues. It was during her time in the Civilian Assembly that Saa began to feel more acutely the intimidation of the Pinochet regime. She went into hiding briefly before being arrested and detained in an annex of the San Miguel Men's Prison (La Carcel de Hombres de San Miguel) for three months.

¶ 16. Leading up to the 1988 referendum that resulted in the defeat of the Pinochet dictatorship and the return to democracy, Saa played an active role in formulating the agenda for the next administration and the years of consolidating democracy that followed. As a founding member of Women for Democracy, Saa worked feverishly in the months before the referendum to promote three goals: the establishment of a government program dedicated to

gender equality; the inclusion of more women in appointed positions; and an increase in the number of women in elected political offices. Work by Saa and other coalition members led to the creation of a government body dedicated to women's issues, the precursor to the current National Service for Women (SERNAM, Servicio Nacional de la Mujer) which promotes women's rights, campaigns against domestic violence, and collects statistics on issues of concern to women. The coalition's work also laid the foundation for cultural re-examination of women's roles in politics, which ultimately came to fruition 16 years later with the election of Chile's first female president, increased appointments of women in government office, and a government policy committing to gender equality.

¶ 17. Upon the restoration of democracy in Chile in 1990, President Aylwin appointed Saa mayor of Conchali, a lower-income municipality of greater Santiago. During her four year mayoral term, she promoted women's rights through a domestic violence conference, a series of women's rights workshops, and other events.

Congressional Leadership: Legislating for Change

¶ 18. Following her tenure as mayor, Saa ran for Congress and was elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 1994 representing the seventeenth district of Conchali, Huerchuraba and Renca. Women account for just 13% of all members of Chile's Congress--the lowest rate in South America--and many female officials are elected largely on the basis of their relationship to famous men, as the wife, widow, or daughter of a prominent male leader. Thus Saa's presence in Congress and her election based solely on her own merits is particularly noteworthy. Saa has successfully campaigned for this seat three times since her first election and is currently maintaining a comfortable lead for her fifth term from 2010 to 2014.

¶9. Just four years after her election to Congress, Saa served as the Chairperson of the Committee to Impeach General Augusto Pinochet in 1998. This committee of legislators attempted to impeach Pinochet and thereby retroactively eliminate his immunity from prosecution on human rights violations. While the committee did not achieve this goal, it did intensify the national debate about crimes against humanity and the role of the Pinochet administration.

¶10. Saa has been a consistent champion for women's and children's rights in the Chilean Congress. Chile's conservative laws often favor men in family relationships, including limiting the default property and legal rights of married women and stigmatizing children born out of wedlock. Saa co-authored and advocated for a bill allowing persons in common-law marriages to have access to communal property rights, legislation which became law in 2007. She also co-authored and continues to champion pending legislation seeking to allow unmarried mothers to cite the name of the father on birth certificates and a bill combating domestic violence by strengthening the criminal code against "femicide."

¶11. Deputy Saa's efforts to strengthen Chile's laws regarding trafficking in persons have been particularly noteworthy. In Chile's highly centralized, presidentialist political system, members of Congress rely heavily on the executive branch to propose and prioritize legislation, although parliamentarians can introduce some types of legislation on their own. Sensing indifference from Chile's government ministries, Saa drafted trafficking in persons legislation on her own in 2002, convinced her peers in the Congress of its importance, and later persuaded the executive branch to re-introduce the legislation as a government-backed bill in 2005. The legislation was passed by the Chamber of Deputies in 2007 and is currently pending in the Senate.

Bio Data

¶12. Saa is aware of the nomination and is pleased. She is available to travel to Washington to accept award if chosen.

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Position: Congressional Deputy

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